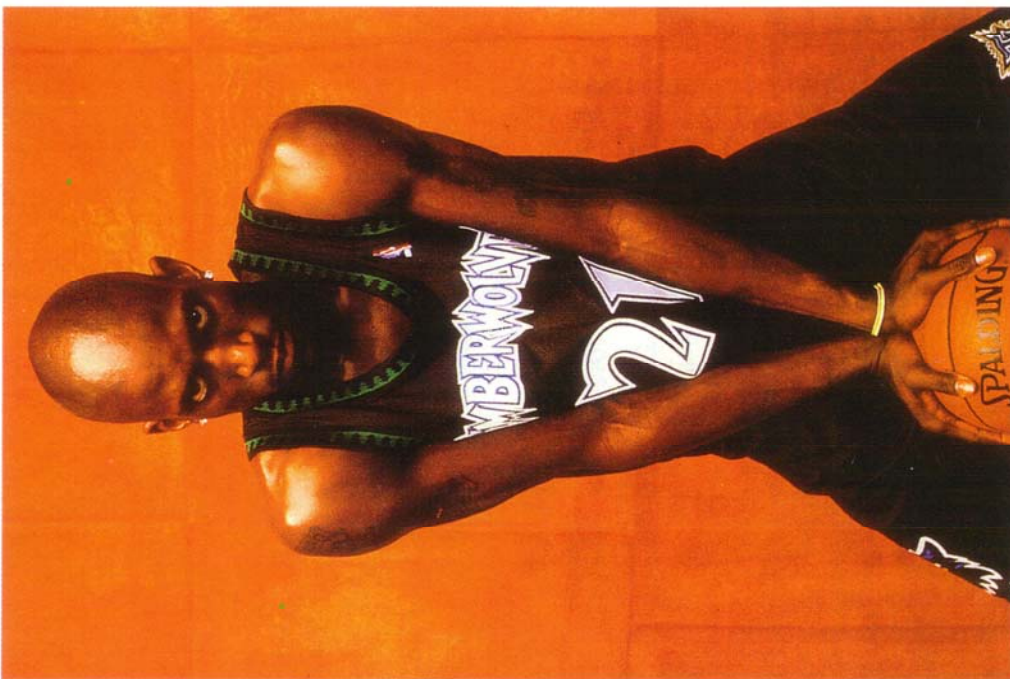
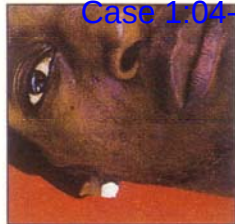
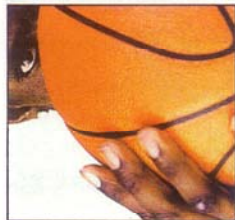


KEVIN GARNETT, T-WOLVES



ance the next. He averaged 17.3 points and 9.3 rebounds in the postseason—both above his season averages—although the Wolves got swept by the Rockets. More importantly, KG showed fire. He and Steph went together like platinum and ice; either could run the break, and either could finish it. They had to stay together. So, of course, they didn't.

GOODES



**IF THE LEAGUE IS STILL LOOKING
FOR SOMEONE TO FILL MIKE'S SHOES,
KEEP ONE THING IN MIND
—KEVIN'S FEET ARE THE SAME SIZE.**

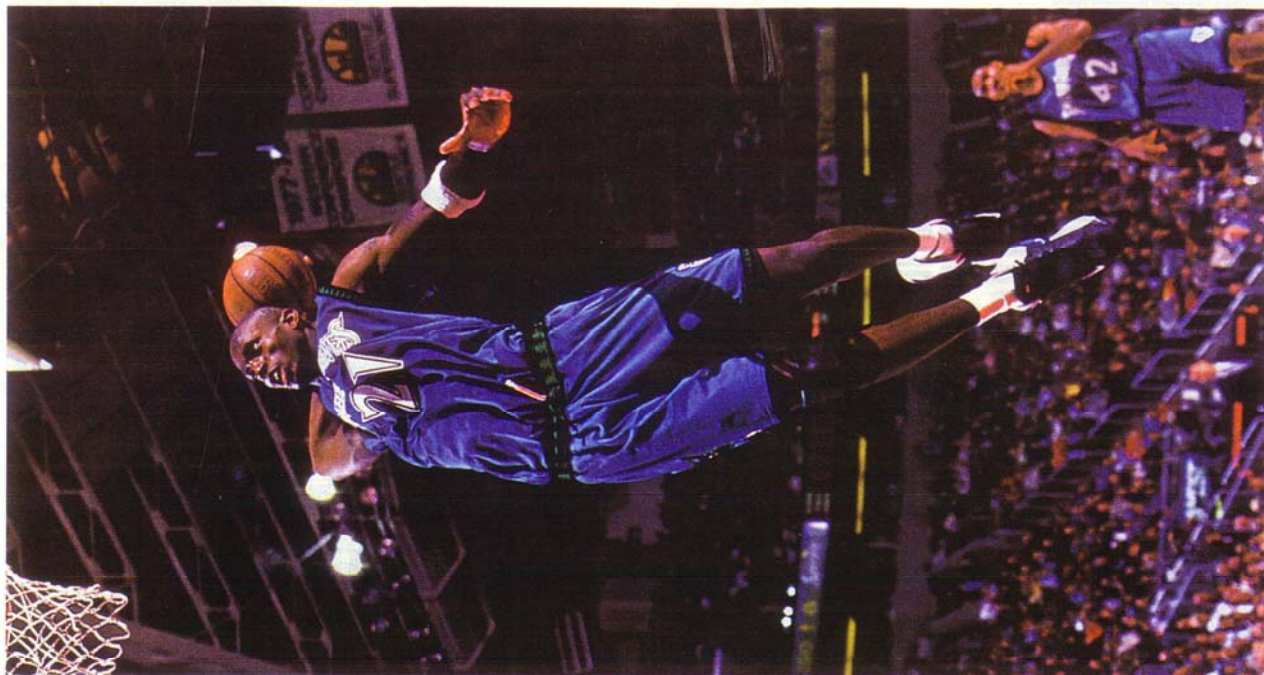
tos like the jersey he wore in the '97 All-Star game and the shoes he wore in the McDonald's High School All-America game. On the right is an airy living room dominated by a black leather sectional sofa. CDs and videotapes cover one wall; most of the videotapes are work-related: T-wolves games, interviews and *Inside Stuff* episodes. Prints from a recent *Sports Illustrated* photo shoot curl around the TV. A portrait of Malcolm X rests over the fireplace. From a back room comes the bass thump of the new Violator Records compilation, one cut repeating over and over.

When Garnett himself finally emerges, he's ready to roll out, draped in his own OBF gear, Dolce & Gabbana glasses, a Nike scully and a pair of sandals. A thin scruff of beard slides down his jawline. A quick note: if you should ever meet KG, be careful. The exuberant type that he is, Garnett pulls greeters in for an emphatic chest bump. For most people, being a good foot shorter, this means your head meets his chest. Don't get hurt—turn your face.

Garnett sits down on the couch to discuss the cover shoot. Talking about the last time—Steph and Kevin together, Showbiz and KG—Garnett mentions that it went down right around the time Biggie's *Life After Death* dropped. That's all that played throughout the shoot. Garnett pauses and looks up at the ceiling. "Dreams of what could have been. Dreams of what could have been."

"Are you talking about Steph?" the photographer's assistant asks. "Take it any way you want it."

While it's certain that Garnett misses Biggie's smoky flow—a big East Coast rap fan, he almost falls down when photographer Jonathan Mannion offers to call DMX for



ABOVE THE

him—the truth is visible the second you step into his house. Over the stairway there is a painted portrait of Garnett, arms raised, boxed in on either side by profiles of Steph and Googs. “I won that in an auction,” Garnett says. “Actually,” he laughs softly, “I outbid Steph.”

It was at a black-tie affair following the '96-97 season, Steph's first and KG's second. As usual, the two were the centers of attention, signing autographs and answering questions amidst the tinkling music and plates of hor d'oeuvres. When the auction started, each of them saw the chance to take a break from the schmoozing. Just as quickly, however, it turned into a bidding war. And Garnett, who had just signed his six-year \$126 million extension, came out ahead. “Every time I come through my front door, I see that,” he says. “I guess it's just a reminder of what could have been.” He pauses. “Plus it's not a bad painting.”

That, sadly, is debatable. What could have been isn't. The Wolves made the playoffs each of the two seasons Garnett, Gugliotta and Marbury spent together and took the Sonics to five games in '98's opening round. Then Gugliotta signed a free-agent deal with the Phoenix Suns prior to the '99 season, and midway through the year Steph forced a trade to the New Jersey Nets. Garnett isn't bitter about the turn of events, just weary.

“Whether you know it or not, all three of us together set tones for 20 years

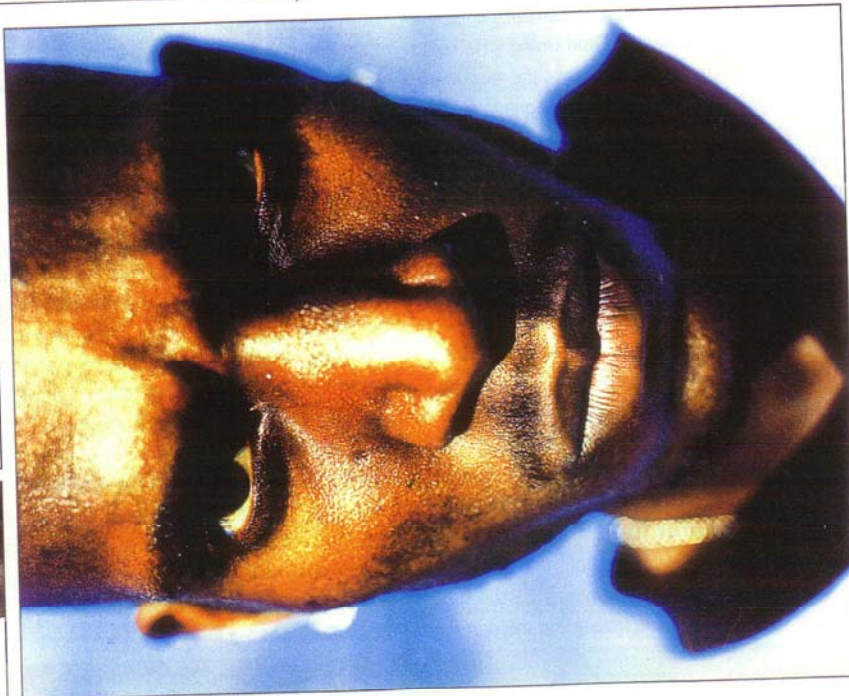
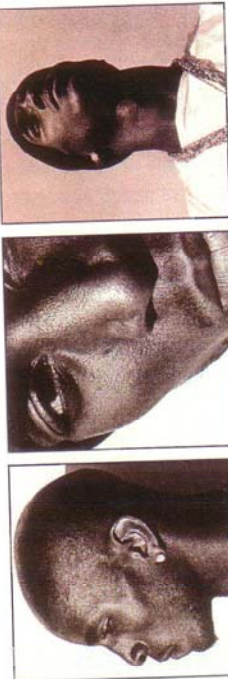
**“THERE'S A LOT OF DIFFERENT
THINGS I'M BRINGING TO THE TABLE
THIS YEAR I'M GOING TO TRY TO
DAMN NEAR PERFECT.”**

down the line for anybody who comes to the Minnesota Timberwolves,” he says. “We was about to set tones for the NBA, like Mike and them set 'em. I felt that we was making so many strides so fast that it was kind of scary. Then when Googs went out—you know he had problems with his ankles—me and Steph always put it on ourselves: ‘if we don't play well tonight, we're not going to win.’ It's almost like Gary [Payton] and [Shawn] Kemp; you know if them two didn't play well, they weren't gonna win. That's what we did.”

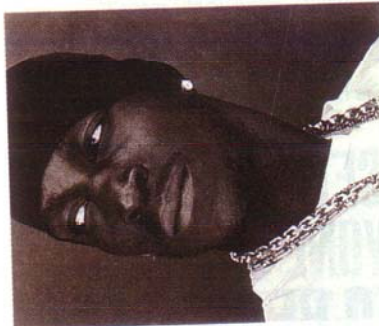
“So from that standpoint it hurt that much more because you've been through the snakes in the grass, you've been through the trees and the forest and the wetlands so to speak—all just swampy stuff, shoes getting messed up. And now we get on top of this hill where we can really see now—we through all that, that cruddy stuff. And you go through that with him—like you're stuck on a bush and he chops the limb off and y'all keep going. It's almost like you get caught in a spider web, and he's gettin' it out of your hair.

almost like you get caught in a spider web, and the spider is gone.

THIS PAGE: ANDREW D. BERNSTEIN/NBA PHOTOS; OPPOSITE PAGE: JONATHAN MARSHON



That's what made it so special, you know what I mean?"
"Yeah, and now you got to do all that stuff again."
"Yeah." He pauses. "Yeah, I gotta be like Harriet Tubman leading the people through."



Garnett is inspired to lyricism when he discusses what was lost. He in turn compares the situation to building up a company then losing key employees, or building a wall then dispersing the blocks. One thing was steady and obvious: the bond between himself and Stephon.

"Our situation was very peculiar, very different," he says. "It had a very different sort of twang on it. How two guys from two different worlds end up meeting each other—

at the same time, two great basketball players, and then also go two different routes, then finally meet up on the same pavement. It's almost like, 'OK, we getting chased by cops, you go this way and I'll go this way.' Shew! Take off. I go this way, he runs that way; he goes around a bush, I jump a fence, jump another fence; he now went around a bush and jumped a fence, and here we are back on the same road. It's kind of crazy that it's like that—all of a sudden, we're back, running from the cops again. He's runnin' to New Jersey and I'm runnin' to Minnesota."

Garnett is still very much affected by Steph's decision to depart. While he is quick to note that they weren't quite as similar as everyone thought—"People have to understand who Steph is, and he's not just KG's boy, he's Mabel's son, he's a whole bunch of different things"—on the court they shared something that might not ever be duplicated.

"I call it the predator in someone, the beast. When they just go, 'We're not losing this game.' Say we were down, and me and Steph would just blast each other for 30 seconds, and then it picks both of us up. We probably end up tying the game or taking the lead, and come back on the bench and throw water on each other. I knew whatever I said wasn't personal.

"It was like something we needed, and we both knew it and without ever discussing it we'd just go, 'Kev you bullshitting, you need to shut him down...' 'Muthafucka, whyn't you...' 'What?' 'OK, OK check this out,' and we get to work. Then I'd say, 'Like that? You like that? Like that?' He would come down and hit a three: 'Yeah boy, that's what I'm talking about.'

"The only way you ever win in this league is when two or more predators or two or more lions, so to speak, just wanna go out and compete. That's what was with the team we had last year: we didn't know how to win. Up to that point I had played with



guys that had made the playoffs with me and went through that whole struggle thing, and they knew how to win. I learned that with them, and when they left it was sort of like I was on my own."

As Marbury tried to adjust to constant losing in New Jersey, KG continued to evolve into one of the best players in the game. He paced the T-wolves in scoring (20.8 ppg) and rebounding (10.4 rpg) and led the team to the playoffs for the third straight season. Despite new teammates, including point guard Terrell Brandon, Garnett and Minnesota were able to hand the San Antonio Spurs what would be one of only two postseason losses.

Along the way, there were things you didn't notice. The way Garnett could bang with the opposing center one possession then trap the point guard the next. The way he blocked shots emphatically, making sure everyone knew who ruled the paint. The way he'd set up Joe Smith, another new teammate, with perfectly-placed alley-oops. The league wasn't exactly pushing Garnett as their next superstar—after all, the Lakers were on—but his combination of athleticism, charisma and just plain likability were making it clear: Da Kid was Da Man. And if the league is still looking for someone to fill Mike's shoes, keep one thing in mind: Kevin's feet are the same size.

WHILE MANNION AND HIS ASSISTANT SORT OUT WHERE THE SHOOT SHOULD take place, Garnett and I retreat to his basement. It's carpeted and furnished, but the ceiling is just raw beams. This is the playroom; there's a sectional couch, a bunch of exercise equipment, a big TV and a fish tank. A pair of turntables are tucked into a corner, and a covered pool table sits in the middle of it all. A sliding glass door opens onto the concrete patio where two Rottweillers, Gotti and Pun (for Big Punisher), reside in a chain-link kennel. They bark furiously at anyone who steps outside, but pile over each other to lick any hand stuck through the fence.

Garnett lounges on the couch and flips through a fresh copy of *SLAM*. We talk about Lamar Odom ("He'll be all right"), Elton Brand ("He could be the next Karl Malone") and sneakers (Garnett refers to the recently re-issued Air Jordan IV's as "Ehlos"). Things are relatively quiet until KG sees a photo of Marcus Camby dunking over Tim Duncan in the Finals. "I woulda fouled the *shit* out of him," he explodes. He stands to illustrate. "If I go up, and my knees hit somebody's shoulders," he says, leaning against the pool table to demonstrate, "if they don't move, I know I can get it. If they lean back, or move, you lose your balance. It's like when someone runs at you while you're taking a jumper. It throws you off."

One of Garnett's boys stands by, nodding his head. Platinum and ice glitter around his neck. "My idea is I shine, you shine," Garnett told *Sports Illustrated* back in April. He didn't mean this in the strictly literal sense, but it does hold true. Each member of the OBF—the Official Block Family, a seven- or eight-deep clique of Garnett's closest friends from South Carolina—wears a matching iced-out platinum chain with his initials. Even Garnett sports an ice-dipped 'KG.' One of the family, a cannonball of a man named Steel, wears a massive medallion the size and shape of a halved tennis ball. It's sectioned like a basketball, with "OBF" spelled out in diamonds.

The OBF is everywhere in Garnett's life: the letters are molded into

the soles of his latest Nikes and embroidered on the front sweatshirt. The Family is in the process of starting their own clothing line—called OBF, of course—and judging from the samples G rocks over the weekend, FUBU and Mecca better watch their backs.

The entire Family lives nearby, giving Garnett a tight-knit circle of real friends, people he knows are going to tell him the truth. "Bug" Peters, his best friend since way back, actually lives in the house. Bug is the closest in all ways. "I always believed that me and Bug will always be boys, to this day we still are," Garnett says. "I know some people might say, 'it's probably the money.' But we'll be everything at the crib and just go out, just get on some bikes and ride somewhere, go walk somewhere, know what I mean?"

There's no denying it: the money is good. Garnett's contract is the biggest in professional sports. His garage alone is like a Jay-Z song to life—a fly-yellow Range Rover is parked next to a jet-black Benz with heavily-tinted windows, 20-inch chrome rims and McBe

**"I NEVER SET ANY TRENDS
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Pirellis. A couple of dual-suspension mountain bikes and a \$2,500 Schwinn Paramount road bike lean against the wall, and a set of rims for a Lincoln Navigator are stacked in the back. But money, no matter how much, comes and goes. History, on the other hand, is permanent.

PICTURE AN 11-YEAR-OLD KID IN SOUTH CAROLINA, A YOUNG KID wants to be a quarterback, like Randall Cunningham. Then he runs from rough-and-tumble Greenwood to the more middle-class Macon. Basketball is the game now, so that's what he plays—running through the friend Bug's house at 6 a.m. to roust him out of bed. They would be into the heat of the afternoon, break for a few hours, then get back out there. That was the routine, every day.

Two years later, a neighborhood bully by the name of Bear makes more than just a game. "He used to bully us, and we had to work every day to be better than him," Garnett remembers. "I was like 13 or 14. I just started getting hungry, just wanted to be better than him."

That grew to wanting to be the best player in the area, then in middle school, then high school. Then he wanted to be the best player in the state. "Once I knew I could do that shit, who was the best in the South? Then the East, then forget that, who's the best in the U.S.?" Just sort of grew, and I never lost that.

"I've always had to seek someone higher than me—'OK, this is I got to catch, this is who...' I want to be the best, that's my goal. I asked my [Farragut] high school coach, Wolf, I think I had some like, I wouldn't say they were ahead of me, but...Steph and Ron M and Robert Traylor and Tim Thomas and a whole bunch of players one by one I'd outline 'em. Vince Carter [mimes an underline]. Sha [Abdur-Rahim]. I felt like these were people that I had to be better than."

The list on the mirror is the last physical one Garnett kept. Since then, he has kept track in his head. Despite his successes—his scoring and rebounding numbers have increased each year he has been in the league—he still feels he has a long way to go.

"I'm all right, man. I'm never happy, there's always something I feel like I can do better. When I think I wanna scream out, I gotta get myself under control; I don't lose it, I just hate to lose and sometimes that comes out in different ways. If I was to go through and dissect my game, there's a lot of things I need to fix."

Told he is being too hard on himself, Garnett disagrees. "I expect so much out of me," he exclaims. "You know, damn everybody else and what they think of me, I really don't care. I know how hard I work on certain things, and if I'm not doing it right I need to work more, and that sometimes frustrates me."

Garnett rattles off the names of the players he feels he is still chasing—Payton, Duncan, Shaq, Iverson, Steph and Jason Kidd, even Steve Smith and Allan Houston. He also gives much respect to Scottie Pippen—"Pip really opened the door for big guys playing point forward or big guys playing defense on smaller guys"—and Chris Webber. There is, however, one guy he feels he will never catch.

"I see it like a cloud. You push through that one and there's another. It's almost like a ladder."

"Do you look at Jordan like the one guy you're always chasing?"

"Nah, you can't chase Mike. Mike is damn near in the—" He pauses, searching, "—stars."

"Above the clouds..."

"Yeah above the clouds, like Gang Starr. Above the clouds. You're not catching Mike, man."

"But you can chase him. You can always chase that."

"Well, you can always try. But I never set any trends on anyone's game; I want to be the best, but I don't want to get it mixed up with trying to impersonate. I'm just saying I'm trying to be distinguished within my own game. I want to have my own sort of label you know, my own style."

THE NEXT MORNING I CALL ART AT 9:20. HE ANSWERS THE PHONE SLEEPILY.

"We're still on for 10, right?" "Yeah."

I pull in the drive at 10 on the dime. The door is answered by Kevin's Aunt Betty Jo. "Kevin's not up. Maybe you can come back at 11:30?" I explain that I have a 12:45 flight. She lets me in. She's cooking breakfast—eggs, smoked sausage, grits. A plate of biscuits is on the corner of the stove. Finally there are footsteps upstairs, the shower starts.

He comes down by 10:30, in a beige wifebeater and sweatshort cargo pants (both OBF), short white socks and Nike Soc Mocs, big rocks still in his ears. We sit down in the living room. Things start softly, as he sips from a big mug of coffee. Meanwhile, Freaky, a cat who's tight with Steph and is crashing at KG's crib, pads downstairs to feed the dogs. He enters the kitchen as I hit Garnett with the question: his top-five all-NBA ever.

"Ooh. The all-time starting five? I would have to go with Magic at the one, Mike at the two. I would put Pip at the three, I would put either Adrian

Dantley or Kevin McHale at the four, and I would put Dream at the five—Dream or an old cat like Russell."

From there, Garnett picks up steam, dropping names like crazy—"Nique, Isaiah, Bob McAdoo, Jerry West. Doctor J. "Could you see Pip D-in' up Doc? I would pay a million dollars to see that. I'd have to see that in person. Watch this." He jumps up, walks into the kitchen and gestures to Freaky. "Pippen playin' Doctor J in a game..."

Freaky isn't having it. "Pippen wouldn't be able to beat Doctor J."

Kevin Garnett stands in his suburban Minnesota kitchen—one that looks like it belongs to a doctor or lawyer, not a basketball player worth hundreds of millions of dollars—gesturing excitedly. "Tell me who this is," Garnett asks. He claps his hands once, then catches an imaginary ball. He crouches, holding one hand at his waist and using the other to wipe phantom sweat from his brow. He pump fakes, then uncorks a swirling jumper. "Alonzo?" Freaky answers. "Oh, Patrick..." Garnett repeats the motions, exaggerating the swipe at his brow and the screwball motion. Freaky is still unsure. Finally, Garnett cannot contain himself. "It's Adrian Dantley!" Freaky jumps in quickly—"He'll pump-fake you all day long. And he was *fadin'*, yo. That's what was tough!"—and demonstrates a sim-

ilar move, falling back from the butcher-block table.

It's just two rabid fans discussing basketball—only in this case one of them will be one of the best that ever played. I know how crazy that sounds, with the swish of MJ's last jumper still resounding in the air. But Kevin Garnett will always be chasing someone he thinks is better. And he is already one of the most complete players in the game. I think back to something he said earlier: "You know, there's a lot of different things I'm bringing to the table this year; I'm going to try to be damn near perfect. Every year brings something new." At 23, he's got at least 15 good years left. That's 15 new things.

Maybe it doesn't sound that crazy after all. ☺

